

FANTASIAS

By the Same Author

KEYNOTES

DISCORDS

SYMPHONIES

THE 'HAZARD OF THE ILL

(In preparation)

FANTASIAS

BY

GEORGE EGERTON



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To

RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE STAR-WORSHIPPER	I
THE ELUSIVE MELODY	29
THE MANDRAKE VENUS	53
THE FUTILE QUEST	73
THE KINGDOM OF DREAMS	99
THE WELL OF TRUTH	121

THE STAR-WORSHIPER

THE STAR-WORSHIPPER

THIS is the tale of a man who was a star-worshipper, and who was made or marred — which is quite a matter of opinion — by his union with a wife who was inordinately fond of porridge.

Well, once upon a time, — in the time that never varies, but always exists, has existed, and will exist, — a little lad was born in a poor cabin on a lonely heath. His father was a hewer of wood and reclaimer of waste places, his mother a dream-maid, who had strayed there one moonlight night, and let herself be caught by his strength.

Her life would have been unbearable but that sometimes, as she lay with her ear

close to the heart of Mother Earth, the myriad heath-bells—violet, pink, and purple—rang gayly or sadly in measure as the winds touched them, and played melodies that caused her to forget—forget even the girdle cakes to bake and the linen to bleach, and so got her many a beating.

When the long, warm, summer nights whispered to the world, she used to steal out of the little room, in which the man lay snoring like a swarm of angry bumblebees, and sit under a witch beam, gazing at the mystic canopy above, from which a thousand twinkling eyes called a greeting. Sometimes the moonbeams made a ladder up which she used to climb and see spirits, with whom she spent hours in sweet converse. So one night, when the reeds were swaying their slim green bodies to the rhythm of their old-world melody, and the river rippled and whispered to the

flowers on its banks, and the white eggs of the night birds gleamed as sign-posts for the mother birds, out moth-faring in the gloom, and the night crooned lullabies, and the music of the spheres above stole down and mingled with the bass voice of the earth below, she gave birth to a little lad. Perhaps his birth hour and place determined his temperament, struck the dual note in his nature,—the symphony of the heavens warring ever with the trull song of the clay; the elusive melody of the moon-beam music, the cool softness of the dew, with the passionate strength of the winds.

The father was none too pleased when she showed him the babe, for it was a delicately fashioned little mortal.

“You couldn’t tell on sight whether it be a boy or a girl,” said he. “I hate weaklings.”

But the little white baby used to lie

with its cheek to her breast and its great eyes staring to the sky above; and the mother felt no more loneliness, for she had some one to watch the stars with her. Of course this only proves conclusively how wanting in common sense she was; for it is obvious that it is much more difficult to find some one to watch the stars with us than to barter some object for a shilling.

Years passed, and the baby grew to a merry lad who chased butterflies in summer and watched the frost fairy scatter diamond dust over the winter snow. Meanwhile, the little mother grew ever weaker; and so one night she called him softly, and he crept to her side. The touch of her hands chilled him as the fear of the werewolf in the forest when the dark leaps down; her eyes, too, yearned over him.

“Say something to me, motherkin!”

She tried to speak, but was only able to

point up to the sky ; and the laddie, following her guiding finger, saw a wonderful star, glowing and scintillating with a marvellous lustre that seemed to flood his soul with a light that was sound as well ; calling with a strange voice that rang in his heart, louder than the blast of the huntsman's horn in stag-chase time.

Then came years of toil ; each season brought its own. When the dawn called, he had to arise and gather brushwood and tie it in bundles ; or peel willow withies, and glean acorns and beechen mast. The light of loneliness burned in his eyes, the shadow of dreams lay upon his brow all through the day ; but at night when he crept to rest and, closing his eyes, shut out the tangible world, — to open them again for the second of sight that is neither seeing as with waking eyes, nor seeing as in dreams, but a flash of vision in which

strange faces glow and fade, and weird signs flame and quench, — then he could see the star and hear the thrilling call.

Mother Nature coaxed him to learn in her school: the fairy-dotting of the fritillaries, the fine enamel glaze of the buttercups, the freckling of the foxgloves, broidered his fancies; and his fancies' soared on winged words as flights of silver butterflies.

Years passed; a homestead grew on the site of the cabin; kine cropped clover where once the clamorous lapwing laid its speckled eggs; machinery replaced hand labour; the new road had blotted but the grave of the mother, and it was over it the father drove one Sabbath eve to fetch a new wife home — an only daughter, with a heritage of corn-fields and well-filled money-bags. There came a great gathering, kinsmen, neighbours, and friends from the far city, guests of the bride. She, strong

in the knowledge of her dowry, was no dream-maid to be beaten to obedience.

The lad lay out on the patch of unreclaimed heath, his eyes fixed on the fleeting cloud-rifts, and when they led him into the company in his work-a-day clothes, with his sullen eyes burning resentfully under his penthouse brows, the father would fain have struck him, but that the bride came between, for sooth to say he reminded her of a vagabond zither-player to whom she had given her heart one summer ago.

She rested her hand on the boy's shoulder and held him at her side, and marking the curl of his lip, as one of the guests recited a verse in greeting, she asked, "Can *you* sing?" Hearing the question, the father bade him do so.

The lad raised his silver pipe of a voice and broke into words, magic words that mated each other as the moon in the sky the

moon in the sea. Some of the guests looked bored, a few snored audibly, but the bride stroked his hand until he trembled under the strangeness of it, and the great guest of the day, a patron of letters from the city, cried, "Bravo!" Then, of course, they all followed suit; and when the boy had quite finished, this guest said to the father:—

"He has genius and will yet win fame! mark me! the boy has genius!"

"What is that?" asked the father, as many before him. At this question one of the guests brightened visibly and broke in, "It is patience!"

To this the notary dissented, and indeed few found it satisfactory; for all the wives were sure they had patience, yet no one had accused them of genius.

"It is Shakespeare!" said the school-master.

"Every one can't be a Shakespeare,"

sniffed one of the matrons whose son wrote corner verse for the county advertiser.

"No, but every one can be a minor poet!" snapped the lady journalist, noting the reply on her cuff for future use.

"It is the thorn-crown of the sorrow-anointed!" said another. So they went on, and though the definitions might be striking, they left the matter unsolved.

"Will he make money?" queried the rather dubiously.

"Scarcely, but his publisher may!"

"Where's the good of it, then?"

"The good of it? That genius alone can answer. It will lift him above the herd, it is a birthright; it cannot be acquired by plebeian study; nowadays it will give him fame."

"What is that?" queried the father once more, for even that word had not penetrated to his remote district.

"Aah, that, too, takes replying; it may mean twenty thousand copies in a first edition, or a whole column in the *Daily Bore*."

"It is," interrupted the cynic, "the world-flower that springs after death from the cairn of stones flung at genius whilst in life."

Now although this conversation added to the gayety of the company and persuaded them that they were sharing an intellectual feast, it was not elucidative to the father, who was a practical man with a son to invest.

"Well, he must be a minor poet," he declared, with a sigh; "I'll get him a notebook."

So there was no more field work, and the seasons followed one another uneventfully until the lad grew to manhood, with a delicate down on his upper lip and troubled frets in the blood.

One hot summer day when the air smelt of resin, and the leaves hung limply, thirsting for the dewy eventide, and the lizards blinked lazily in the sun, and an odorous hush lay over everything, he stole up to the unclaimed wood, to a glade where a brook gurgled musically and a miniature waterfall pretended to be furious. He flung himself down and leant with his head against the trunk of a tree, watching the patch of azure visible between the tree-crowns. Something rustled behind the tree: "A squirrel," thought he; something laughed: "A pixy!" and he laughed himself at his own fancy. A shower of wild rose-petals closed his lids — he held still — a heavy body dropped near him: "A dryad!" he whispered gayly; two hands stole over his eyes, he stretched up, seized the wrists and felt along; two arms came round the tree: "A maid!" he cried hap-

pily; the hands unclasped softly — he looked up and met the laughing gaze of eyes, velvet black, sparkling under the straight brows of a gypsy maid. A tangle of elf locks — witch's hair, with a glint of blood in it, as folks say when the black, red, and brown flirt with the gold on the same head — hung round her ears; lips red as rowan berries curved in roguish merriment; a kerchief of speedwell blue crossed her bosom — a delightful contrast to her nut-brown kirtle.

“Well, star-gazer, cloud-watcher, wastrel of summer and sunshine! Your face is pale as a frost-kissed wind-flower, your eyes ‘like unto a wounded stag’s!’”

“Are they? not so yours! *They* are like ripe blueberries moist with morning dew; and when you laugh they sparkle, as if the sun of the hottest noon had sucked the dew into a kiss! What is your name?”

She laughed an elfish trill: “Men call

me Eve, Earth-sprite, Lust of life, Youth's desire!"

"And your parents?"

"Father I knew not, mother neither. I wash in dew, dry in the sun, bed me in moss when the day is done—I live, dance, sing, without a care, until the sheaves fall; then I join my people and go south to the land of sun and dance—whilst *you*, you wrap your heart in a moonbeam shroud, I revel in sunlight."

She knew the storehouse of the squirrel, the larder of the honey-bee; how to make dye out of the scarlet berries of the vipers'-victuals, called by some priests'-pintles; could imitate each bird's note or squeak of vermin.

"Hide, lad!" she cried; and the boy crouched behind a bush. Dropping the rabbit she had strangled with a wire, the wood-wench stepped into a cool green

square freckled with dancing lozenges of gold. She stood with her head thrown back, one slim brown hand stretched out, her lips pursed forward like a cloven rose-hip. Then she uttered a luring, whispering hiss, hiss, broken by fluted trills, purring throat notes, a musical chirrip, chirrip, chirrip, swaying lightly in a rhythmic dance that symbolised the passing of sylvan breezes, the call of the woods, whisper of leaves, and rill of gushing waters. The notes melted into the quivering summer air, there was a responsive shiver in the copse and wood and undergrowth, and her sombre eyes filled with magnetic light, as when a sun-ray passes through a crystal globe resting on blue-black velvet; and lo, although it was the siesta time of the birds, there was a rustle and flutter, a flip of quivering wings, and the wood became once more as in the first days when man and

beast and bird had not learnt to fear each other. Bird after bird appeared, creeping closer, until a chorus of notes mingled with hers. The thicket quivered with the exquisite warble of the freckled thrush; the pan-pipe call of the sable ouzel dropped from its golden-fluted bill; the operatic black-cap cropt up to a melodious climax; the quick note, matching its tail-flirts, of the tiny russet wren, cut short the sedge warbler mocking midst the shade of the pensile willows that fringed the brook near by; cheery linnets, yellow-hammers, finches, and willow warblers, even the shy elf-like gold-crowned kinglet darted like a fairy meteor through the green; timid beasties rustled in the undergrowth and peered inquisitively; a scampering hedgehog halted and thrust his quaint swine snout and cunning eyes between the twayblade plants; squirrels held their tails erect like fans. The whole wood

rang with melody : soft, shrill, sweet, with the joyousness overpowering the sorrow that lurks neath every joy ; stealing in ever softer notes, until the boy's breast yearned and strained to breaking point ; and the tripping feet of the witch maidlet trampled his boyhood out, as the feet of the grape-treader the juice from the berry ; and manhood with its imperative call of the senses, its thrill of the blood,* woke in its stead. He forgot star and heaven, and felt at one with earth and the mighty, material forces of nature. The birds circled ever closer to her swaying form in magnetised flight, the flowers turned their faces to her, breathing fervid rills of perfume, the light shivered,* the sun laughed, and a fresh marvel entranced the youth. Flights of butterflies appeared, pearl-dotted fritillaries, and white admirals, others watchet-blue, and orange-brown, with marvellous dottings and tracery, fluttered

like aerial gems about her bendsome figure ; a great tortoise-shell beauty rested on her outstretched finger, a purple emperor on her dusky hair. Suddenly she broke into swifter movements, and, waving her hand upward, uttered a warning note, such as one may hear in the woods when the jay appears in egg-time—the melody dwined away, the birds vanished in hurried flights, and the butterflies soared upwards, leaving her, an incarnation of the untameable, the world-renewing quality of nature in man, and the lad, no longer a lad, rose to meet her.

After this, the sub-tone, the trull song that was in his nature, waxed strong in him, and he burst into lyrics fresh as morning dew on cowslip meads, wayward as the tendrils of the wild vine, pungent as freshly plucked garlic, generative as sun-glow ; he called them “Woodworts and Poppy Songs,”

and away in the cities men found the verses sticking to their tongues as the after-taste of wild honey.

The father swelled in the reflected glory of his son's name; for strangers sought the homestead, and the great watermill that was built on the riverside found shareholders amongst the visitors.

When the corn was stacked and the harvest songs sung, and the glory of green was fretted to russet brown, the wood-wench bade him adieu with a careless laugh. He fell asleep where she left him, and when he awoke in the chilly early autumn night, the world was shrouded in moonlight, and high above his head the star, the star of his childhood, gleamed and shivered, and the old cry pierced to his inner ear, and he flung himself in sorrow on his knees and sobbed a regret. It was after that he wrote his "Bindweed and Darnels." It was not so

popular; for remorse and contrition are unpleasant topics, and the critics consider it bad form to make one's public uncomfortable: it never reached a second edition.

So the father and his advisers laid their heads together, and decided that it was best to fasten the domestic hobbles to his feet, for in that way they hoped to make him do work that would sell. The next time his creditors assembled with their bills, the father called the poet, and told him he would send them away satisfied provided the poet would accept the wife of his choice in exchange. He, being still remorseful for his apses with the earth-trull, and deep in the hyming of an epic on Eros and the Earthworm, consented. The maid they chose was inordinately fond of porridge; indeed, that was her gravest fault, for her personal plainness was so gilded over by her dowry of shining coins that no one ever even

“Aah,” sighed the poet; “will it give me emotions?”

“Stuff!” screamed the wife; “you have no further use for them; they’d only lead you astray if you had them!”

This remark was truly womanly, for its truth was in ratio to its blindness. In time a daughter came. He called her Astra, and ordered his own breakfasts; but the respite was short; soon again each morning brought the porridge, and each night the same question, “What have you written to-day?”

As time passed, new little hostages came, for she was punctilious in the performance of her duty to the stage as in all else; he wrote an ode to each arrival. At this the critics cavilled, and said he was log-rolling his domesticity; for there had been a glut of Scotch kail in the market, and they were all suffering from dyspepsia, and glad to find a scapegoat upon whom to vent their

humours, and thus it came to pass one day that he retorted in reply to a sneer, "You have starved the poetry in me with your confounded porridge; I can write no more poetry!"

"So much the better; there's no demand for it; write prose. Castor and Pollux want boots. Astra needs pinafores. There's a slump in cereals, and I've got to hold them over till Dad makes a corner in wheat!"

Thus it happened that the poor poet worked up in a turret from morn till eve, and his work brought money, but the folks who read his admirable essays on Cerelean terraculture never guessed that he hid his face in his hands on starlit nights, and cried like a child for the witching beat of the elfin feet dancing rhythmic measures in his brain; or knew how his heart ached for the magic words, many hued as butterflies,

flying on golden wings to a world of unknown readers.

Meanwhile the twins reached manhood, and others came crawling up the ladder of life, for they throve on porridge, and there was family name, wealth, and position awaiting them: the poet was quite forgotten in the citizen.

Middle age advanced slowly and surely, and with it that last call of the senses, that wakes in a man and makes him burn with the desires of youth, and its stress of passion for a brief spell before its slumbering quiet.

It awoke in the poet clamorously, and all being in order he took his knapsack and pilgrim-stave and set out for a year and a day.

He climbed mountains, wandered through valleys, visited sunlit lands, where sloe-eyed maids sang as they beetled linen in the stream, or danced to the snap of their own slim fingers, and went wearily through the

wide streets and noisome slums of great cities. The old sore yearning for the star woke in him, the old voice thrilled and called, and he went up to the summit of a lonely mountain with his thoughts, and the years between fell away and all trace of his monotonous diet vanished, and when he came down to the valleys again, his face was spiritualised and illumined with a great light, and so he set his face homewards once again.

When he came within sight of the white house with the vast outbuildings, the many tiny cabins, each a home, lying in its shelter, cuddled like puppies to the mother's dugs; the well-stocked granaries and cultivated fields, all the outcome of his prose, he stood still and gazed upon them with a smile upon his face. All slept around him, and a quiet gathered in him—a quiet so absolute that the passage of a gossamer thread

through the air would have sounded as the rending of an Arctic sea, and the shedding of a moth's wing as the fall of a forest sire, — and down in the very innermost recesses of his own soul a beautiful bell was tolling, tolling, the thrill song of the star. He stumbled and looked down — then he gave a great glad shout and looked heavenwards. All was misty and blue and unflecked up there — yet, the laughing eyes of his star were shining up to him from the puddle at his feet.

Thus they found him in the morning. His wife said as she laid him out and noted his etherealised features: —

“I'm sure he neglected his diet; he'd better by far have stayed at home with his porridge. That comes of star-gazing.”

No doubt the great majority will agree with her, but then neither are they star-worshippers, — except on the music-hall stage!

THE ELUSIVE MELODY

THE ELUSIVE MELODY

ONCE upon a time there was a house to be let furnished. It was a house at the end of a long avenue planted with trees, and even from the outside one could see that it was unlike its neighbours. It seemed to have a brooding look as if the soul sorrows and struggles of its former tenants had in some way exercised a psychopathic influence upon it and endowed it with aught of their human attributes. Strangely enough in the park next to it grew an aspen tree, that shivered ever as it leant over the wall and touched it as if in sympathy. It too was the only tree of its kind there, for the others were plain chestnut or oak.

One day the dusty bills were taken down

from the windows, and a dray brought many boxes with labels from distant ports pasted on their covers. Then a gypsy-faced lady, with a bewildering smile, and a grace that is quite out of date to-day, followed with three little maids and a nurse girl. The eldest of the children was a lanky maidlet with tangled elf locks and weird eyes, that peered questioningly out of her little sallow face. The second was fair locked and grey eyed, eyes filled with luminous speering and inborn sadness.

They had not been long in the house when she took to sitting on the stairs near the tall clock ever ticking off the minutes of fate, "watching the feet," she said; and truly the sound of footsteps—tiny tapping heels that tripped, a heavier tread, and slow faltering steps—could be heard in quiet hours of the day, all through the long evenings and silent nights.

Many strange noises, the thud of falling bodies, ringing bells, doors that opened noiselessly, caused maid after maid to leave, to the despair of the dainty lady, who was awaiting a little guest with the coming of Santa Claus. Yet the child sat smiling with her wistful eyes, and called, "Hark! there go the little red-heeled shoes with the buckles and clocked stockings, and those heavy steps are boots with iron spurs, and always they follow the little feet"—and when questioned as to the figures owning the feet, she used to look puzzled, and no coaxing could draw any more from her.

The long parlour was a narrow room with two high windows; it was sombrely furnished in grey and red; tall mahogany bookcases held calf-bound volumes of the *Spectator*, the works of Afra Behn and early playwrights, a stiff sofa, a quaint escritoire, and an old spinet with fluted green silk drawn

into a rosette at the back. The room was always filled with shadows, and the quick fleeting shadow of shadows that one felt about one but never saw. The mother rarely sat there alone; when she did take her work there, the children crouched on the rug at her feet, and the maid never passed through the hall except she had coaxed the other maid to come to the stairs and wait for her—they used a sunny bedroom upstairs as sitting-room.

The eldest girl with the gypsy eyes saw nothing, seldom heard anything unusual, felt no fear; yet a strange thing happened to her there, not without influence on her nature. In the ten years of her vagabond life she had not learnt to play any instrument, nor was her ear very good.

One gloomy afternoon they were all in the long parlour, the snow was falling in big soft flakes, wrapping the world in a shroud

outside, and far down the avenue, the muffin-man's bell rang with insistent monotony. The fire burned redly in the dim room; when a cinder fell the children started and drew closer together. The mother sat with a letter on her lap — a letter written on thin foreign paper, every page crossed, for those were the days of shilling postage; and she cried bitterly and silently, and the shadows gathered closer and closer with ominous clutching thrills, and the sofa strained as if a burden had been pressed slowly down upon it. A table in the corner creaked strangely, and all about them was a sense of the impalpable touching the palpable with ghostly fingers.

The grey-eyed child, with the wistful eyes, crouched closer to the mother; out in the hall the tap of heels echoed between the tick of the old clock, and the child's eyes watched in a tense way; and, the tiniest

of all, a quaint, little being with a delicate nose bent like a hawk's bill, steady eyes, and a proud resolute mouth, that was odd in so young a face, watched her.

"What do you see? Always looking, and looking, you never play now."

"The feet."

"Which ones?"

"The little ones, the pretty ones; there come the others, *always* following."

"Where are they?"

"Near the piano."

The tiny child stood up and walked over with clenched fists, and kicked sturdily with her little strap shoes, crying: "Go away, feet! I hate you, I hate you! I wish I could see you. I'd kill you!"

The mother roused and called the mutinous small being, with the undaunted eyes, to her side, and rang for lights and tea. Grey-eyes whispered to the elder

girl: "She always stands near the piano—it's a funny old piano; open it after tea."

The mother found the key in the old cabinet, and they opened it. The keys were yellow as a hag's teeth, and the little maid struck a note—a soft, sweet note. Then the curious happened: the elder girl rose and went over to it and paused with her slim fingers resting on the keys, then she pulled out the stool and sat down, and numbers came dancing through her brains,—numbers that added up, and subtracted, and divided in a wonderful way, with a strange blending of colours. Following the impulse they gave her, she played a quaint melody with a dance measure in it, and Grey-eyes clapped her hands, and cried: "Little-feet is dancing, and he can't get her! He can't even get near her!" The girl's sombre eyes glistened with joy as

her fingers touched the keys. The numbers some way suggested airs she had heard; she played them all with delicacy and precision, and the mother rejoiced at this unguessed-at gift, and the maids outside forgot the ghosts, and broke into lilting songs. So she often played, all she had ever heard, by ear, and Little-feet's tune that kept the ghosts from walking.

Ladies, rare visitors, who heard her play, spoke marvelling at her gift. Most of them said it was unwise to let her play by ear, because it would spoil her fingering and prevent her playing by note, which is often only another way for saying playing by rote; for there are always people to whom original expression must be cousin-german to original sin.

The mother used to watch her dusky little face, and listen with an ache to the passion, and yearning, and searching joy,

of the melodies she called forth. Sometimes she would break into a wild dance, that set the mother's own blood leaping until she marvelled and prayed; for she knew her days were numbered, and she could do naught to help her child in the struggle to come. At such a moment the seven sorrows of maternity would pierce her soul, for she had set a delicate vessel afloat on the great sea of life; but it was not given to her to pilot it through the troubled waters to harbour.

So the winter passed. One maid left, and the shadows gathered ever closer and peered ominously, in spite of the lengthening days; and lo, one evening, when the child laid her hands over the keys no numbers came — all was discord. She could not pick out the most tiresome air, — not even “God save the Queen,” — with the fingers of one hand. She could have wept for her

lost gifts, but that tears came seldom to Dusky-head.

Soon after that they left for a smaller house, as so often happens when another member has been added to the family; for the tragedies of life have a humorous turn for paradox.

The years sped, on ~~ever~~ cheaper and more worn shoes, and one grey evening the mother folded very tired hands on her breast, too weary to feel any sorrow at leaving.

Little Hawk-neb never came to her teens, and met grim death, just as she had striven with the ghosts she could not see, with her eyes undaunted. Maybe it was as well; for she was of the race who break e'er they bend, and the ghosts in life are grim to meet.

Sad-eyes sailed out to distant lands, and those who bring home tidings of her, say

she looks sadder than ever; for the ghosts she watches are in her own heart now, and nothing in life can lay them.

Dusky-head shot up to maidenhood, scorn for all untruth scorching her heart, seeing ghosts just as little as in child days, for she had a hurtful grip on realities; her eyes discomfited liars, for they felt they were found out. Women friends she had few; and although this deprived her of a seat in the councils of scandal, she was not unhappy, for one June day the magic numbers came dancing along in rhythmic measure, as at the old spinet, save that this time they gave her words, not tunes — words like arrows winged with silver, that never failed to hit the mark; golden-tipped words that tickled to laughter, or others that moved to tears — hosts that wore her livery and stepped into their duties in time to her need. It was a downright pleasure to see how easily

they rhymed. Dusky-head was glad; for they, too, as the music on the old spinet, kept the ghosts away from all who heard them.

Unfortunately they absorbed her so, that she forgot she was a woman, and that is a thing nature rarely pardons. So one day poor Dusky-head went unthinkingly to her doom. She was wearing a peach-coloured gown, and the colour of it tinged her cheeks, as a buttercup held under a child's chin will gild it to ore, until her little face was like a fine carving just tinged with pink; and her eyes sparkled like stars under the shadow of her hat. It was in the golden springtime, and she looked like a wandering peach bloom carried on a vernal breeze across the king's highway. The very almond trees flushed in sympathy as they saw her; her feet scarcely touched the daisies, for they were keeping time to a madrigal in her heart—the Mating of Spring with Love.

After a while she met a huntsman who was chasing butterflies in a meadow — a strange occupation for a man, one would think, yet by no means uncommon. When he saw her he blew on a lure he carried, and Dusky-head trembled; for singular to relate, it echoed the melody in her own heart, and she knew that she had been waiting to hear it for many a day, and that all unconsciously it was for this she had donned her blushing gown, and wandered out in the world's meads. For once Dusky-head was shy, and the huntsman, who had caught many butterflies, and knew almost every species, hid the laughter in his eyes; for he surmised that he had come across a rare specimen, and that it would take more than an ordinary pin to fasten her to a cardboard heart for his collection. So he forced his steed to its knees by a dexterous turn of wrist and doffed his cap, crying: —

“Greeting, flower face, little witch, princess! So small that I could bear you all day on one arm, so great that I needs must kneel to you. I have chased butterflies through many Mays, yet it was for you I have been waiting!”

Now this was quite a new dialect to Dusky-head; lads had called her sister and friend, even confided their love troubles to her, but no man had called her the sovereign of his soul and hinted that life was barren until he found her.

“Put your foot on my instep, mount before me, and we will ride to the land of Hearts’ Desire and seek the fable flower of perfect union!”

Dusky-head laughed a denial, but the huntsman stooped and lifted her into the saddle, and she did not fight against him; truth to tell, it was pleasant to have all choice denied her. So they rode on through

the dripping May blooms, and sometimes they jumped obstacles, sometimes they halted beside a stream to rest and amused themselves by sending flower messages to the unknown. She said: "The world seems strangely different."

"That is because you have never seen it from a seat on a man's arm before."

And indeed with Dusky-head it was as when a near-sighted person puts on glasses for the first time,—the delicately serrated edges of the leaves, the fairy veinings, the silver hairs on the under side, the whorls and stencillings and dots become sharply distinct where all was a blur before. He whispered, "Shut your eyes!"

The white lids fluttered to; he kissed them, and when she looked up again he said:—

"Hitherto you have always looked with a maid's eyes; now you are looking through a man's spectacles."

After that they rode on in silence, their souls playing kiss hands to each other as children do, and they made many tentative journeys into the land of one another's spirit, and sometimes Dusky-head would come on unexpected barren places; then she would shut her eyes wilfully and lay her face to his breast and break into tears, for she dreaded to be disillusioned; and he, feeling the tiny shock, would burst into song, and catching her up in his arms, dash along until laughter came, and with it forgetfulness.

At last one day they really came as they thought to the gate of the city. It was a curious gate fashioned out of fossilised human hearts set in the most original manner between a quaint tracery of vows, alas, — much chipped.

They rode through, and Dusky-head procured a white gown and crowned herself with myrtle and journeyed to the temple in which

only genuine flower was supposed to grow. They plucked it, astonished to find it quite an ordinary bloom to look at; joined hands, put the horse out to pasture, and settled down for a while. Time passed. Occasionally when the huntsman lay on his back watching the errant leaves flutter to the ground, his thoughts would stray to butterflies and fresh pastures, and he longed for wine and wassail and mad, glad rides in search of unknown specimens. 'Tis true, they sometimes saddled the wonder beast and took a trip, but he was out of condition and Dusky-head's weight tired his arm; and she, feeling this, elected to stay at home. So her little face lost its roseate tinge, and hope and expectation, best brightener of a woman's eyes, faded, leaving them in shadow, until she looked like a fan of meadow-sweet fainting in the grip of a hot hand.

At length one close-clipt winter's day,

when the old-man's-beard (traveller's-joy is its summer name) hung in feathery rifts on the skeleton bushes, as if some fairy had whimsically transformed a wandering silver mist into the semblance of a plant, found them riding along a monotonous road. They came to a gate at the entrance to a graveyard beyond which the paths divide. A man sat at the gate and sold maps of the locality. "And what is this curious portal called?" queried the huntsman.

"Habit!" replied the man; and seeing that they looked somewhat astonished at his answer, he showed them an explanatory note, stating that it was so called because a wise woman once said, "Habit is the lych gate of love!"

This statement struck them both as a truth one has not dared to own to oneself. Dusky-head looked sad, and pointing to the graveyard said, "And that?"

“Oh, that is the burial ground of lost illusions. Many people never do any good until they have been borne through it; for then they turn their undivided attention to some practical pursuit. Their land is on the left; as you see, it is thickly populated. The other on the extreme right is peopled by poets and idealists and all sorts of dreamers. They wander about like hermit crabs. Sometimes the people across the way give them alms,—for they are generally poor,—or choose one of them to leaven the dough on their side when it threatens to become stodgy. Indeed, occasionally when they discover one practical enough to sing in praise of their commerce, or battles, or to help them with an election, they provide him with laurel crowns and a pension; however, *they* are generally found on the strip of debatable land you see in between.”

The huntsman scarcely heard, for he had

been pursuing a private train of thought, so he broke in irritably : —

“ Perfect union is a farce ! Everything is subject to the law of change. I didn’t need Ibsen to tell me that ! ”

“ Is it ? ” faltered Dusky-head, bending to hide her tears. “ I didn’t know. ”

“ Of course not, being a woman, where would we be, if you did ? Well, it is a pity, but I don’t see what else is to be done. Shall we go through ? ”

Of course, he chivalrously left the choice to her ; besides, it might save pricks of conscience. She, being generous, gave him the answer he desired.

So they passed through and signed a quittance at the other gate. The huntsman rode off, at first quite slowly, perhaps to spare her feelings ; but she soon heard him break into song as he urged his steed into a gallop, for he had espied a most lovely

butterfly. He had long come to the conclusion that the rarer species to which Dusky-head belonged was unsatisfactory as a specimen; for its delicate colours were transient, and it needed such a lot of attention; a robuster kind was quite good enough to stick a pin in.

Dusky-head took the path on the right, with her peach-bloom gown sadly faded, and found herself seldom inconvenienced by attentions as before her May time. So, seeking to live, she strove to put her sorrow into song. Words came; those golden patines on the robe of reality, that men call poetry, danced before her once more — the dear words, how they came graciously tripping: silver words for maid's love, scarlet words blazoned with orange in the service of passion and lust, purple, gold, and brown, watchet-blue and sap-green, sober grey and flashing yellow; on they marched to the call

THE MANDRAKE VENUS

A PILGRIM, born of investigation by truth, was travelling along the highway of the world. It was a great wide road trodden bare by the never-ceasing footsteps of the children of man; and if any one possessed, as did this poor pilgrim, the inner ear of which the hearing is so fine that it registers the continuance of all the air waves—called, for convenience, sound—of every vibration since the beginning of the world; and the vision, which is the past sight of all humanity, he would have found in himself a cinématographe of the universe from time primeval. To him the highway was such, for the great dead still walked it in company with the living.

Many by-roads led from the great road to the cities of the world, only the mile-stones registered cycles instead of ordinary miles. Sometimes the pilgrim grew very weary; for the ceaseless beat of the marching feet, the tramp of armies, dull tread of the labourers, gliding steps of the women, and the tripple of the little children, following their invisible pied piper, gave him no rest.

Many things puzzled him. The eyes, in particular, wearied him; for he saw the *same* eyes peering at him from between the long slit lids of some snake-crowned Egyptian courtesan, the hollow sockets of a peasant woman straining her back to her burden, the meek eyelids of some penitent nun. Once when he seated himself near a spring to rest, he spoke of this haunting idea to a tinker who was mending a kettle merrily. He was a tinker by

choice, having failed to make the world accept him as a critic.

• "I have a theory about that," said the tinker.

"Yes?" cried the pilgrim, eagerly, for indeed these ghost eyes puzzled him sorely.

"Of course I don't see the eyes in divers settings as you do, and, as a critic, if I ever hope to get anything to do in the conventional schools, I am bound to discourage the use of the historic present, much less a vision that might add the historic future. I am inclined to think that there never have been any more people than there are now. What I mean is, we have all been some one else; we are only going on over and over again."

"Hum," sighed the pilgrim, dubiously; "but we started with two —"

"Oh, of course, if you are a believer in

the apple myth! But even so," jauntily, "I am not prepared to say at what stage in evolution the creation of psychical atoms ceased, to be replaced by reincarnations in successive physical envelopes — perhaps with the birth of conscience and moral responsibility. In any case why trouble? What has logical reasoning to do with speculative philosophy? The intuitive discovery of to-morrow *always* upsets the logical conclusion of yesterday!" admiring a patch he had put on the kettle, with his head aslant.

The pilgrim bade him adieu, and journeyed anew until he came to the widest of all the side roads. It was a tremendous wide road along which youths of every year danced recklessly, — ghost lads with sandalled feet, flower crowned and hyacinthine locked, as well as the youths of the present day. Here and there on his way he noticed a mother

stoop to her lad as she kissed him with tears on the threshold of home, and fastened the cockle-shell of pilgrimage to his hat; had noted how she told him with lowered lids and a maid blush on her matron cheek, in clean, plain words of the way *this* road led, and implored him to avoid it. 'Tis true• they had not been many: most of the mothers had closed the door as their lad bounded forth on the path of Youth's venture, in ignorance of its dangers; and seated themselves by the fire to enjoy a good cry, a cup of tea, and a roseate romance with none of the unpleasant facts of life in it.

Thus it happened that most of the youths, when they came to the turn of the road and saw the procession of lads, hesitated. A few, still feeling the mother's words in their ears, hurried along the highroad, but the greater number joined

the throng recklessly; for a gorgeous magic bird with glowing plumage soared and fell, dropping notes of golden music in a witch melody that thrilled in their blood as fire boils water, and whispered in their senses and roused the infinite yearnings of youth that are a torture and delight. It sang of woman, the other part of him, in her beauty and sorcery; and the lads, following the fatal lure with dazed eyes, never saw that the bird was stabbed in the breast by a giant thorn; that its song was the quintessence of pain which borders ever on a delirious joy; and that a trickle of blood ran as it soared.

“Whither are we going?” they shouted to an old man cowering at the roadside.

“To the city of many names,—the Kingdom of the Mandrake Venus, Man’s Desire; where the meads are ablaze with

passion flowers and poppies, and the fountains are fed with good women's tears!"

As they neared it, they broke into a wild irregular dance, for the song of the bird was throbbing in their blood now, and in this manner they reached the gate of the city. They were forced to halt at the brazen portal with its curious tracery of serpents and flowers, for it was closed.

"It is the hour of sleep!" said the bel-dame, sitting on her hams inside the bars; "when the dusk falls, you can enter."

So they sat down and chanted the song of the bird to beguile the time away; and when the brooding dusk swooped swiftly and silently down, shrouding her face in a mantle of shadows, there was a great movement inside the portal as when an army awakes, and the wide streets and narrow alleys became suddenly flooded with electric light, the gates swung open, and the men

darted through and stood in bewilderment inside. The houses were many, all with open windows and doors. There was a flutter and a flimmer of drapery, a sound of tripping feet, a rill of perfume that crushed back the cool breath of the earth, and the delicate exhalations of its night blooms, as the breath of a drunkard might absorb that of a child.

"Where do we go now?" the pilgrim asked of a man with hollow, fevered eyes, who seemed to know the way.

"To pay homage to the World Harlot, the Mandrake Venus, the Arch-wife, the Ever-existing, who has been, is, and will be. The only ruler whose dynasty has endured unbroken through all the phases of time. If you know her not, turn back. . . ."

The train of men and youths danced as if obsessed until they came to a great marble palace. Entering, they found themselves in an ante-room. The white marble floor was

inlaid with a mosaic device of serpents and flowers. They passed through to an immense hall; plashing fountains of enervating perfume played in each corner, and a music that seemed born of madness, and the ecstasy of pain rang from a hidden orchestra.

A gigantic throne was placed at the end of the hall. It was fashioned couch-form of bones,—men's bones, the pilgrim thought with a shudder,—gleaming ivory white as if bleached by rain in moonlight; polished with their marrow until they shone like mirrors, thickly encrusted at intervals with golden coins. Superb cushions of a costly silken web flashing crimson in its purples were laid upon it. These details did not strike him until afterwards. His eyes were held by the gigantic female, couchant amidst the changeful drapery. Fascinated, repelled, he felt as a frog in the cage of a snake, for she was splendid in her audacity; surpass-

ing in her beauty ; white with a flabby softness of flesh, and a vileness of expression that made her loathsome as a leper.

She lay supinely, darting keen though languid glances through her heavy lids, from eyes that burnt with sombre fire, and lured as a serpent ; blazed with passion and yet were cold ; her full lips curved sensually, her hair — strange hair, black yet gold in its lights, so that no man knew its real colour — was crowned with scarlet flowers ; a long scarf or mantle of the thinnest tissue, saffron in hue, shot with carmine, richly broidered with gold, hung from her shoulders ; it was caught at the hollow of her throat by a clasp of a myriad shining gems. A flexible serpent, the lamellæ of virgin gold, a triumph of the goldsmith art, encircled her loins : so cunningly were the diamond eyes set in the jewelled head that they seemed quick with an evil lustre. She held an iron thyrsus

entwined with fresh bindweed, and the blooms of the enchantress nightshade in her hand.

'The eyes of all those who had entered the hall were fixed upon her, and she held them with her basilisk gaze.

There was a crash of music, and the lure-song of the bird that thrilled in the blood, burst from a thousand throats; and from each aisle women advanced, clad in garments of cobweb tissue that clung to their swaying limbs, and parted airily to the rhythm of their steps — fluttering, trembling into ever-changing hues. They swept on in sinuous lines, swaying, swinging, interlacing in maddening intricacies; scattering scarlet blossoms as they danced, until their little white feet seemed to dip into a sea of blood. Some had passion flowers twined in their hair, some roses, some jewels, others were clad simply in the marvellous mantle of their hair. Eyes blue as brook-lime, dark as

storm nights, changeful as opals, innocent, reckless, tragic, glad, peered from their many-typed faces. Sometimes the rattle of their anklets and bangles made a clirring accompaniment to the melody, sometimes the lights dimmed, and they danced in silent steps until their movements became shadow-fine as the sensuous whispering of a tropical night. The men nodded to the melody until they stood, with their breasts thrust forward, as if drawn by invisible magnets held in the feet of the dancing jades.

The pilgrim noted that many of the women were old, some barely reached girlhood, but they all danced as if bitten by a tarantula, until the vast hall was as one gleaming, glittering, intoxicating intermingling of rhythmic movement and rainbow play.

The music died away in a sob; the Mandrake Venus rose to her feet and waved

her thyrsus, the mantle fell back, revealing her voluptuous, leprous, white body, from her powerful breast to her slim strong ankles. The throng pressed forward as one man to pay her homage and lay their offerings at her feet. Many just bowed before her throne, and darted towards the crimson hangings behind it. To those she nodded indifferently; but as each novice stepped forward, she bent and smiled as she snatched the white flower of virgin youth that adorned his brow, though he knew it not, and stuck it in her girdle.

As the last man passed, the music pealed riotously forth in ever madder strains, and ~~slaves~~ bearing crystal goblets of frothing wine drugged with the juice of white poppies and black henbane, filed through the hall.

She sank back into her erstwhile position, with her chin held in the cup of her cruel

hand, her eyes gazing enigmatically forth — superb in her isolation. The pilgrim stole softly out, and sauntered into one of the many galleries that led from the throne-room. Some hours later he emerged into the close night, with eyes heavy with the pain of what he had seen.

Ever and again a wail penetrated to his ear; he leant and touched a crone, as he thought, on the shoulder. A woman looked up, and the depths of despair in her eyes made him shiver as the feel of the unseen about one in certain rooms. She was young in years, but the youth in her face was seared to age by pain. A glimpse of her mouth would have paralysed a tender heart: she rose to her feet and walked with him.

“What is that wail ever and again?” asked he.

She laughed bitterly.

“That is the cry of the maid as she is torn from innocence and womanhood to minister to the service of the great Harlot mother, even as the mandrake cries as it is torn from its roots. Each night brings a victim —”

They walked on in silence until they came to a lazaretto. A tumbril was drawn up at the entrance; prostrate forms, some silent, some laughing in blasphemous jest at their own plight, were being hoisted into it; it rattled down the white street towards the great highway of the world.

The pilgrim — for the faces he had seen had frightened him — looked with questioning eyes at the mask-like face at his side. She answered his mute query: —

“Those are the victims of the mandrake poison, the evil virus, that works in humanity to the downfall of nations, and is carried from generation to generation; they are bound to the lazár houses of the great city!”

stone pix in which to isolate their souls; and the pilgrim wept at the feet of the dead wooden Christ with the poor features mutilated by stress of time, who gave no answer to his agonised prayer: *When will the dynasty of the Mandrake Venus cease to govern amidst the sons of men?*

THE FUTILE QUEST

THE FUTILE QUEST

THERE was once a little lad born in a hamlet in the midst of a wide valley. It was fertile and peaceful, and nestled as a child to its mother's breast; gently rising hills wrapped protecting arms about it, and away in the background rose a great purple mountain, and at the foot of the mountain there was a portal leading to the road of adventure.

He was a beautiful little lad, — straight-limbed, silken-locked, eager-eyed, — but he suffered from far-sightedness. It was not that his physical organs of sight were in the least abnormal, but the inner eyes of his mental vision (for surely each sense has its counterpart in our spiritual self, and in

few are they in perfect harmony) had a fatal quality of seeing the distant object in a halo of entrancement, whilst that next him escaped his notice altogether.

There were few distinctions of class in so small a place, so all the children played together and learnt in the one school. This little lad used to steal away, or play truant, with the miller's maidlet; sit watching the clouds, or stare with yearning gaze fixed upon the snowy cap of the mountain. The two children were seldom apart, although it would be hard to define what attraction the dreamy boy possessed for the little maid of active habits. They went to school together, munched their oaten cake at the noonday rest, coned their lesson out of the same book. When the good mother gave them a slice of goat's-milk cheese to their bread, it was quite a feast; the little maid used to take half-moons out of the

good sweet bread and show her white teeth as she laughed, but Farsight only ate half-heartedly. He used to say:—

“I wonder what they have for lunch in the castle beyond the forest at the selvedge of the world—roast pheasant and sour cream sauce, off gold plates, and all sorts of fruit, such as are in the picture-books in the schoolmaster’s room,—njum njum! cowslip wine too, in silver cups every single day!”

He quite lost appetite for his oat cake as he thought of the fine fare in the castle beyond the clouds.

“Well, I couldn’t be more full than I am,” replied the little maid, curling a buttery crumb off her cheek with the tip of her little red tongue; “after all, it’s all the same when it’s down.”

Now that kind of argument is very irritating to an imaginative temperament with an

element of discontent; and it is scarcely to be wondered that he used to turn his head away with a frown and watch the silent cloud-maids gliding before the wind in gowns of quaker grey with tags of silver. But Patty Heartsease did not mind; she used to put his cake in her basket, knowing well he would eat it by and by, in class time, with the greater zest.

In winter when they sat roasting chestnuts round the great fire, and the hot sweet smell oozed out of the creamy nut as it burst its brown husk, he used to let her pick them out of the fire for him and toss them from palm to palm, blowing them till they cooled, whilst he dreamt of hot summer days. He could smell briar roses, the dust after a shower, and the wholesome pungent smell of freshly dropped horse dung; and he longed with a yearning that made him blind to the shadows playing hide and seek

in the big kitchen, and the firelight dancing in Patty's eyes.

But when the summer came, and the flowers coquetted, and Dame Nature was busy in her simple-closet distilling perfumes on a lavish scale, and the sun literally scattered gold with the advertisive extravagance of an African millionaire, and Patty Hearts-ease danced in the high grass, crowned with corn-flowers and ox-eyes; he just sighed and flung himself on his back in the shade, to dream of the crisp winter snow that crunched so musically under one's boots—the soothing silence, undisturbed by organ grinding, gnat or fussy bee, of the drowsy white world; the long row of doors, left open for the children, shining like friendly eyes along the dark street, when they slid home from skating matches on the frozen meadow. The foretaste of the future always robbed the dish before him of its savour.

So the years birthed, and married, and died until he reached adolescence; each school-mate chose his calling and sat down to it, or wandered forth to find it.

One of those spring days when the voice of the earth whispers mysteriously and one feels drawn by secret cords to the wind and the clouds, to the plants that are bursting into bloom, the cattle big with young, the very river flowing with its burden of melted snow to the sea, as if one is own brother to each animate and inanimate feature of nature; he packed his wallet and went round to his friends to say good-bye, as he meant to make a bid for fortune in the beautiful unknown. The pensioner who had fought in many battles and who had come home to lay claim to an estate of six feet in the tiny God's-acre of his birthplace, shook his head as he met the lad's eyes, for he had seen just that look in the eyes of

many a young soldier on the eve of his first battle.

Farsight had no misgivings; it was a good and great and glad thing merely to live, so he could not forbear crying out, as he looked into the tiny workshop where Peter the Potter fashioned mother earth into useful vessels, adding a beauty of his own giving:—

“Don’t you wish you were in my place, Peter?”

The potter looked up from the apostle he was carving out of a block of wood.

“No; for *you* go to seek you know not what, in the world outside, you give yourself to the unknown. I wait, for I know what I want, and I mean to make the great world come to *me*. Show me one golden island in the desert out there and tell me where to seek it, and I go and rest not till I find it; but the muscle and bone and fibre of *me*, the heart and soul and

strength of me, is here in the soil of which I am made. The only things of value are the things I am born with, because they represent me as a personality; the things I acquire are outside possessions of vulgar worth. Farewell, Farsight!"

Down at the fountain near the Gate of Venture, the maids stood gossiping as they drew water. They laughed a God-speed and pelted him with flowers as he passed; but his inner eyes were fixed on the white-clad maid with the winged feet and the star on her brow, who fled before him beckoning ever; so he heeded them not. Patty Heartsease waited at the portal, with wan cheeks, and tears in her steadfast eyes.

He kissed her carelessly, for playtime sake; and when she held out a bunch of purple pansies with golden hearts, he never saw them, but darted on with a shout of glee.

He journeyed through many countries, his lute gaining him bread. Women seeing the seeking look in his eyes, answered it with a question in theirs, and thus it came to pass that he had many gallant adventures. He visited the Kingdom of the Mandrake Venus, but the harlot he met had Patty's eyes, so he left it as he entered. The tale of his many hazards would fill a shelf in the British Museum. He joined an exploration party to the North Pole and learnt of the starvation of sunlight; sailed south to the Spice regions until his very soul grew languid with the odour of southern blooms; fought with the lust of war, singing with exultant battle chants in his blood until he saw red and felt no pain of wound; played a part in the rise of a State until a place in the Cabinet awaited him and a knot of red tape checked his liberty; so that he took flight from the whole concern.

Gold came to him; he let it slip through careless fingers. Then one day sombre-clad loneliness sat down at his side, and he saw in a woman's eyes as she looked past him to gaze at a youth near him that *his* youth was over. Travelling becomes difficult when every step onward is a slip down hill.

Resting one afternoon in an inn, he heard a party of students talking enthusiastically of his native hamlet as the cradle bed of Peter the Potter, Peter the Sculptor, the great personality of the age, who was to show the younger generation how to live. They were bound on a pilgrimage to see him; the burghers of their town had defrayed the expenses. They spoke of how the world of art flocked to see him, how a school of followers had settled in the hamlet which he had raised to a town. Farsight drew near to them.

"I knew him once well," said he; "we went to school together; he was the son of old Kitty, the broom-maker, the poorest beggar in the whole plough-land."

He spoke somewhat sneeringly, for, truth to tell, the parting words of Peter came home to him as he sat, a poor wayfarer in the company of a deputation of students on their way to do the potter honour.

"Neither is he rich now in worldly goods," said the student, who was spokesman for the party; "but he has fame, and just the things that rouse the envy of the moneyed mob who are forced to respect the one thing they cannot obtain with their money —"

"How's that?" asked the innkeeper, in amazement. "I never knew that before."

"Because to be a genius is the accidental birthright of the few; it is the only absolutely unpurchaseable quantity in the uni-

verse. Some people add love, but that is a fallacy; besides, the imitation you *can* purchase is excellent, and wears better. Art is the only true aristocracy!"

"But," objected the burgomeister, who had aspirations to distinction as a patron of the arts, "you can purchase art."

"You mean you can buy works of art."

"Aye, or the artist," said the cynic.

"No; for then he ceases to be an artist," retorted the student, hotly.

"Well, it's very strange," said Farsight (who could only remember that Peter, when they played together, always had the knees of his breeches patched, so hard is it to see greatness under a shabby attire); "has he never left his native town?"

"Once for a short tour to the big cities, but he hastened back; for his theory is, that, that which makes the kernel of his personality, thrives *only* on the buckwheat grown

on the hillside of his native valley. His maxim is: 'The great man is the individual who forces others to see through his eyes, who uses the common sight of humanity merely as an occasional gauge by which to test the development of his own vision. That the only school-teaching of value is that which shows the scholar the way to learn by himself: mere cramming from outside in is useless. A recipe for the indefinable quality that distinguishes the true artist, is not supplied in the text-books of the State.' "

So they argued, each pleased at the sound of his own voice. Farsight was quite out of it; and when they took up the laurel crowns and addresses, and departed with cheers, he sat wondering sadly how he had missed the way.

More years dragged wearily down hill, until one late autumn evening found him at the portals of his native town: a broken

tired man with dimmed vision, the outlook of the future all blurred by dancing visions of the motley past.

He had evidently arrived in time for some great festival; for strains of music echoed from tents erected on the hillside, crowds of people streamed through the streets, and the long road was crowded with vehicles.

“What is it? Does the king pass through?” he queried of a little lad who was shouting gleefully as he danced, first on one foot, then on the other.

“It is the golden feast of our Peter,” answered the laddie, proudly; “every boy in the town is to have a pound of plum cake, and every girl a ribbon and a looking-glass.”

Farsight sat down disconsolately on a stone by the way, but the crowd jostled the shabby wayfarer so rudely, as they hurried to the main street, that he struck into a by-

path leading to the God's-acre where his forbears slept. Then he saw how the hamlet had grown from hamlet to village, village to town, town to city: all the old landmarks seemed to have vanished — nay — there in the hollow he could see the sloe-black tiles of the dwelling of Patty Heartsease. He walked slowly, for his feet ached, and when he reached the garden he saw an elderly woman leaning over the wicket! She put her hand to her heart as she saw him, stood upright and opened the gate; they went up the flagged path together in silence. He sat himself in an old high-backed chair near the hearth — they used it as a throne in the days when they played King and Queen, and Patty plucked the chestnuts from the burning.

She set food before him, and the crackling logs sputtered, and hissed, and whispered, until they brought back those days with the keenness of a reproach.

"So I have come back, Patty ; it seems 'as if the changes ate many."

"Yes ; the changes are many, and you, Farsight, did you find the golden rose of your dreams?"

"No ; the golden rose shed its petals long ago ; like enough, I left the heartsease behind."

The tears gathered in his eyes ; for he saw, for the first time in life, what lay near him in its whole simplicity. This woman had passed through all the phases of childhood, girlhood, and womanhood harmoniously, as a deep river runs its course to the ocean. The reeds may ripple it musically, the winds lash it into waves, but the essential calm that is not stagnation, and is in itself an element of joy, remains unchanged. Even the relentless fingers of time had traced the passages of the years tenderly on her face ; the light caught her hair as she bent her head.

“Your hair is golden, Patty; I thought it was brown—”

“Strange you should think it so now, when it is but the flame-light touching the white in it. It *was* gold when you left.”

“Have *I* been a fool, Patty?”

“That is a question each man, and no man, answers to his own satisfaction.”

“I have been a fool, Patty, ever seeking happiness in the future, never seizing the present; now I have come back a beggar.”

There was a clatter of tiny clogs on the flags outside, whisperings, half-cries, subdued laughter broken by smothered shrieks; then the door opened and a curly poll popped in—a thrust from outside sent its owner in on his hands and knees amidst peals of laughter. Soon the room was filled with children clustering round the woman in the chair. They pulled out offerings of cake from amidst the odd treasures of tiny

pockets,—wonderful water-worn pebbles from the brook, cobbler's wax and pieces of string that might come in useful for anything. She had taken a crippled laddie on her lap and pillowed the little head on her bosom.

Farsight, as he looked, marvelled why this woman with the deep chest, wide hips, and tender mouth had mothered no children of her own. Scarcely knowing why, he asked:—

“Has Peter never married?”

“No, he has never married.” She hid her face on the little one's head, but he could see the colour stain her neck.

“Why?”

She looked up, and something in the quiet eyes went home to him and called back the noonday he stood at the portal and said good-bye to her. She, as she was then in her slim maidenhood, with the heartsease in her outstretched hand, flashed vividly

across his inner vision as a picture thrown across a screen. There was a sob in his soul, a sob of ruth: for this woman, who had passed to her barrenness for his sake, with the dream-children that had never taken flesh, folded away in the casket of her heart — for himself, because he would leave none of his name behind, no son of his body, no daughter of his spirit, to carry him on through the æons of man's existence.

The door opened suddenly. Peter the Potter came in, the children drew back in awe at the sight of their great man in his gala robes, and stole out. His eyes sought the crouching figure in the chair, and a flash of resentful scorn lit their sombre depths; then they rested on the woman's bent head with a yearning love that was strong as the whirl of the storm blast, warm as the sun on slate, deep as the ocean.

“So you have come back, and as the dream of great deeds done in the night fades with the waking, so *your* dream is out! What harvest have you gleaned in the vineyard of dreams? What did I tell you? You wastrel of life’s chances!”

The tone stung Farsight to reply:—

“Well, I ask you for nothing, Peter; life has brought *you* what you sought!”

“Life has brought me what I forced it to yield me; no more!”

“Why should you resent my failure? I have harmed but myself—”

“You have harmed but yourself! No one dare say that in a world where the issues of life are so inextricably tangled. I resent it for this woman who has let her life slide by in waiting, mothering the fruits of other women’s wombs whilst her own lay barren. You knight of the futile quest, you chaser of figments!”

Farsight interrupted angrily : —

“ All that is best in the world is born of the dreamers ; you can't do without them.”

“ Aye, of the dreamer that binds his wayward fancy to some human stake, grips his dream ere it flies, and gilds some object of clay with its radiance, who weaves the silver tissue of his dreams into a mantle to conceal the sores of poor naked humanity ; not the one who lets his dreams work like dry-rot in his heart — ”

Farsight stood up to leave, when Hearts-ease stepped between them ; as once before in the olden days she had stepped between these two, as they fought amongst the king-cups in the meadow. She laid her hand on the potter's arm.

“ Go, friend Peter ; it needs many kinds of wisdom to make a law for the sons of men. Yours is the wisdom of the world's success . . . when did *that* ever bind the heart

of a woman? Youth and I waited — maidenhood with its love-song of the stirring senses, womanhood with the imperative cry of the mother stirring under the heart, and I have said farewell without regret — for all these years I have had a dream in the sanctuary of my heart; can you or any man say that some day in the beyond it may not be more than a dream? The kernel of each man's being is more incommunicable than a dream to his fellow man or woman; the essence of humanity is solitude in the depths. I have stayed true to my dream, and it has blossomed steadily through the years into a plant of wondrous growth, filling all my life with fragrance; mayhap the reality had been less sweet. You, too, have dreamt, Peter, for was not the desire of me *your* dream; the stake to which you bound it? The shadow of *my* dream has come home to me. Good-bye, Peter!"

Farsight, blinded by tears, saw clearly his quest had been futile ; for he had travelled in a circle, to find that for which he had wasted his life in the chase, waiting for him at the starting-point. He knelt at her feet and laid his head in her lap like a wearied child ; she raised it to her breast and laid her cheek to his, and gathering him under the wings of her great love, folded them tenderly round his shipwrecked heart — so he dropped asleep, and Heartsease laid him away to his rest.

Of course, from a utilitarian point of view, the quest was entirely futile ; but the utilities are finite things, and Farsight, for aught we know, may have only climbed up a ladder of dreams to awake and realise them in the beyond.

THE KINGDOM OF DREAMS

THE KINGDOM OF DREAMS

MAN had crept up through cycles of evolution to the dawn of the new era when conscience, and with it responsibility, awoke. In the first glad days he had fought, and ate, and slept, and begat his kind without the need of dreams; slept as a healthy, happy child, tired with the stress of the day, will fall asleep with a smile on his chubby face, and pass through the change of twilight, midnight, and dawn in blissful unconsciousness, waking at the morning call to difficult realisation that the night is past.

The first rude civilisation even brought its complexities; Conscience, Thought and Co. awoke, individual possession produced

envy, jealousy, and schemes for self-aggrandisement in each brain.

Discontent, ambition, and as a result a criticism of creation, began, we are told, in the ranks of the angels. So it came to pass that two of these, pitying spirits, twin sisters born of the mating of light and shadow, looking down upon the struggling world, were filled with sorrow at the lot of the children of men. In a moment of inspiration they founded the Kingdom of Dreams.

Each night at the hour when the spirit of sleep steals over the land, touching the eyes of all with a leaden-tipped wand, the sisters open the gates of their kingdom; and they may be seen sitting one at each gate, casting with shuttles of ivory and horn; and as they cast, the fabric of dreams grows apace: they use moonbeams, spindrift, gossamer threads, the motes of stray sunbeams, the glimmer of rainbows, and many

other evanescent and beautiful things in the making.

In the first era of this wonderful kingdom, it was simple enough, but as man advanced and his sub-consciousness became developed, and the storehouse of his mind filled with hereditary memories, the dreams grew even more confused, the kingdom vaster, until the shuttles were forced to fly with such swiftness that many men had only a fragment of a dream; and it was not given to many, to grasp even that and keep it to the full hour of wakefulness; until at length practical men, with ever-growing veneration for the concrete, ceased to attach any meaning to them, or at least to confess it openly.

Yet many found solace there; barren women fell asleep to awake in green meads in which tiny children revealed their graces like the first blooms of the year, unfolding shy petals to the sun call in the wonder

world of spring. Each woman found there her dream-child and saw herself and another in its eyes, and cuddled it closely to her arid breasts and carried the memory of it to her waking day of loneliness. Husbands married to shrews found there the meek wives of their regret; inventors, unthought-of markets for their patents; pale clerks tied all day to desks in counting-houses, stealing an afternoon nap under some black-armed tree in a suburban back garden, dreamt of gigantic trout, landed in a style to make old Isaac discontented with his title to immortality — what boots it if their greatest waking feat had been the landing of a two-ounce roach? Half-starved genius saw himself besieged by obsequious publishers, all anxious to bring out his works in éditions de luxe, showing specimens of binding that would make a dummy volume precious.

Most of the dreams came with the night,

and most of the dreamers went back to the actual through the ivory gate, to be cheated of the memory even of that promise of their dreams. A few fared through the gate of horn; to those their dream was realised.

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A man and woman both nearing middle age were sitting by the hearth in the woman's room. She was eager-eyed, sad-mouthed, with her face filled with shadows; the man, who had seen her last, years ago, when a look in her face was a pick-me-up to jaded souls, a hope-sign to disheartened endeavour, marvelled at the change. Looking at her more closely, he realised that underneath, his place in her heart was as he had left it; that even youth was hers, though the years had traced their calendar on her face and her hair had lost its lustre.

He was alert, confident, strung to en-

deavour, and it was *this* woman who years ago, had touched the mainspring of his being, and inspired him to sail out and conquer. All his ambition had been realised. He had thought of her all through the years, when he had time. Indeed, she was the only woman who had ever sat with him in the intimate hours of his self-communion. The main incidents of her somewhat chequered career had reached him in a strangely coincidental way; and now, when he had set others to roll the stone he had first set going, he had come back and sought her. She had met him in the old way, and he had embraced her, as a man realising a lost chance, with something between a curse and a sob. They had happened on the subject of dreams.

“Dreams?” he had said. “I don’t believe in dreams. I have little patience with moon-struck mortals; action is what I pin my

faith to—the blow to follow the impulse to strike.”

“Aah,” she said, with her peculiar smile, the smile that hurt him more than the droop of her mouth had done, “and yet, were it not for the dreams, madness would seize the best of men. I could not do without my dreams. Shall I tell you a tale?”

Being wise and versed in human lore, she did not ask, Shall I tell you a dream? for it is a curious thing that although most people have dreams, yet few will listen patiently to a recital of one. Tell the dream as a story, and it will be listened to with interest, or at least courteous patience; make the mistake of saying, “It is a dream,” and the interest will be replaced immediately by impatient boredom.

“There was once a little girl child who had no childhood; for the realisation of the cares of life was thrust upon her from her

earliest days. Life was very ugly, with the sordidness that debt and poverty forces into it. Her old ways caused her to be shunned by her schoolfellows, and so she was thrust back on her fancies. She believed in fairies, and looked for them everywhere. Sometimes she was lucky enough to see one, generally of the Leprachaun tribe, one in particular, a strange little mannikin with a very Irish face, scarlet cap, and leather apron; for, like all his kith and kin, he was a brogue-maker; and used to sing laments as he soled and heeled, and punched eyelet holes in elfin footwear. He was a great source of encouragement to her, with his cheery business.

“When the small house reeked of soap-suds and steam, and the ‘man in possession,’ almost a fixture, snored in half-tipsy slumber in the back kitchen, she used to steal out with the last baby—always too.

heavy a burden for her thin girl-shoulders — to the fields at the back, where the tall poplars stood sentinel, and the pollard willows fringed the drain, once a streamlet, and looked like grotesque gnomes bristling with green hair. She used to sit there hushooing the solemn, delicate baby, sniffing the smoke that curled up from heaps of burning weeds — perfume in contrast to the home smell of grog and suds. • And when the sight came to her, the memory of all else would fade. The tiny folk would come stealing out to play. Once she saw a hurling match in the ‘rath,’ and the exultant huroo of the winning side seemed to ring shrilly from every hedge and hillock. Calling to a playmate, who was coming across the fields just then, she asked if she, too, had not heard it; but the other laughed and answered, ‘no,’ she had only remarked a sudden chirping as of many crickets, and

the 'wheeze' of a yellow-hammer from a whin clump.

"And once in the late gloaming, when the mother sat at the meagre fire (for she missed the glow of the tropics, and shivered in midsummer), weeping as she fashioned tiny garments out of discarded greater ones, and disguised their poorness with pretty stitchery and quaint broidery; she stole out and leant over the broken fence, and looked up the by-road, transformed by the witch-white moonlight, so that the clumps of dock in the refuse heaps looked like tropical plants, and all the old tins shone like precious silver vessels.

"The sound of wheels echoed in the distance; two horsemen with half-masks on their faces, and pistols in their holsters, galloped up and drew into the shadow of the trees. The rumbling of the wheels became ever more distinct, until a great coach, .

with lathering horses and urging postilion appeared; both riders trotted out, and one cried, 'Halt!' The moonlight glistened on the barrel of his pistol; the second man, of handsome chin and deep, merry voice, rode to the door and spoke to those inside, with a laugh. A maiden stepped daintily down; the watching girl noted the scarlet heels of her little shoes, and the quilted satin lining of her travelling-cloak. A sobbing serving-woman followed, dropping on her knees in the dusty grass, and after a second's pause a man, with heavy face, pallid with fear, got out reluctantly. He gave up his watch, rings, diamond-studded snuff-box, and a canvas bag tied with a leather thong without a word. Then the first man ordered the postilion to take out the leader, and they made the heavy man mount her, face to tail; and having tied his feet under the belly of the beast with a scarf, turned her

head, and sent her galloping along the road she had come.

“The lady’s short upper lip curled with scorn at the cowardice of her late companion, and a smile of relief crept over her face whilst the tears trembled on her lashes. The highwayman whistled thrice; a fresh horseman came on the scene, unmasked, a goodly gallant, and the lady gave a cry of joy, then bit her lip in confusion.

“The man of the chin cried heartily, doffing his hat with a mocking air:—

“‘Good evening, friend; methinks we cry quits, a service for a service! Here is the lady. The guardian is disposed of, for the sorrel will make straight for her stable. Replace her by your own mount, and the road to happiness lies before you!’

“No sooner said than done. The lady, and the gallant, and the maid entered

the coach and departed; but curiously enough, it was on the face of the highwayman with the chin, that the lady's eyes lingered as they drove away.

“Many such romantic scenes of adventure made the girl forget the bailiffs and the soapsuds. Years went on, the girl grew to maidenhood and joined the ranks of women toilers in the great, grey, gold city of London. Hard work, and small wage was her portion; but the streets were soon peopled with the men and women of by-gone days; she was not often sad, because of the dream-world in which she moved. But although the frail sheath of her body was as the scabbard for a will of steel, her heart was all soft as a woman. She was lonely; all her life she had craved for love; her strong heart called for it, but love such as she desired is hard to find. Once, she made a friend of a lad,” — the

man looked up, — “but he took her affection as a guerdon and went his way. Life then became more lonely still; so twice she bartered her freedom only to find that lust of her body, and need of her strength, self-interest in fact, had cheated her in the guise of love. Each year gave her keener vision, until she saw with all her senses; life pressed upon her, the mystery of existence; the fear of the uncommunicable, the cruel jest of creation with its seemingly wanton freakishness, and forces of destruction disillusioned and wearied her; when she coveted Euthanasia, something in her jeered mockingly at death, meaning finality or rest. She needed her dreams ever more; and as dreaming begets dreams, soon the glamour of dreams lay over everything, and she became ‘detached,’ a dual being of which the most precious self was the one that dreamt. She became less lonely, for

there is a freemasonry amongst dreamers; they all understand one another without need of explanation; to them the people in the outside world seem blunted in perception.

“If you think it over,” she said, “the whole world belongs to the true dreamer. He alone is lord of all kingdoms, for he has come upon the kernel of all wisdom—a realisation of the spiritual poverty of the actual, the impossibility of any one being absolute possessor of any object. How I make that out? Why thus! A man is a millionaire, rich beyond the dreams of calculation. Yet, to me the dreamer, he may be a pauper. I may know him to be a grab-and-barter Jew boy, with a hankering after Christianity and ham; as far removed as sunlight is to dip light, from that, best of all, true gentlemen, the well-bred Hebrew, proud of

his Judaism. Knowing this, I despise him; his money is no more than withered leaves or fairy gold in my sight. Practically I am richer than he, *because* he can't impress me with his money or worth; besides, I have owned more wealth in my dreams.

"No mere ruler is great to the true dreamer, for he never bends his spirit in ordinary homage; and surely all other deference is mere form. If he be forced by etiquette to say, 'Sire,' that is but an outer form of expediency, not touching the soul of his personality which may patronise an emperor in thought. One can love and sin as lustily in dreams as in the flesh; the dreamer is master of all men and all fortunes. The picture for which the connoisseur has paid a prince's ransom is painted on the visual memory of the dreamer for nothing. He has but to close his eyes, and by a tiny effort of will, call,

it, to existence in all actuality and fix it on his wall, or where he will, and gaze at it to satiety. No man or woman is more than a buoy to him—a buoy to which he fastens his earthly barque while he sails out in spirit on the ocean of dreams. Those, who do not dream, work, and strive, and toil, ever in hope of ultimate realisation; the dreamer enjoys all in anticipation. You see I could not do without my dreams!”

“Dear woman,” cried the man, “now I know why your eyes look through me and beyond me, but never dwell in mine; why, although your words are touched by the tenderness of your voice, there is a cadence that is a mystic inner tone ringing apart from the sound; but I would hold you in my arms, all of you, that too of you which sails out into the land of dream-venture,—that elusive spirit of yours I

crave too. Would God I had held you tightly that spring years ago, before the shadow dropped upon your face!"

The woman laughed softly.

"Think you that would have helped? No, the true dreamer is born; for the twin sisters of the horn and ivory shuttles, seeing the atom's fate in the mirror of time, anoint it as their own before it opens its eyes to the light of day. I have tasted of the bitterness of all sorrow—it holds wisdom—believe me, old friend, the best and dearest woman for each man will always be the woman he has never possessed."

"Yet will I risk that," said he. "Maybe you can teach me to dream, mayhap I can bring one dream of yours to fulfilment; do *you* fear, you dear woman of dreams?"

The woman of dreams smiled, and the smile was a strange blending of joy and regret, but she said quietly:—

“I, my very friend! I fear naught, for the man or woman who has once entered into an inheritance in the Kingdom of Dreams is beyond the power of man to hurt or fate to conquer.” And she laid her hand in his.

THE WELL OF TRUTH

THE WELL OF TRUTH

THERE was once a woman with an iron tongue. Indeed, she was an unfortunate person from her birth; for when the fairies assembled to see what gifts they could give her, they found they had run short in their stock, having just come from the lying-in-bed of a lady who had presented her lord with triplets—all girls. Being a man of frugality, he considered this was adding insult to injury, and was naturally upset. The fairies, at all times aristocrats, were so put out by the vulgar fuss he made that they quite forgot their stock-taking; so when it came to Verita's turn, one fairy was obliged to anoint the baby's eyes and tongue with the tears of a seer, which he had let flow into a bottle that was thrown

at him in the market-place by a servant of the Honourable Company of fishmongers, on the occasion of his great prophecy anent the acquirement by the state of all food monopolies, and the mortal sin of destroying victuals to keep the prices up when the bantlings of the land are 'starving. Of course, considering that some of the royal scions honoured the companies with their favour, it 'was foolish of him, and only proves that seers are proverbially blind—to their present interests. Well, the child grew up in a great house alone, watched other happier children playing in the meadows from her high nursery windows. Her mother was a beautiful lady always clad in bright silks, and delicate laces, and jewels that flashed like eyes filled with love-light or anger.

Once the father seeing a strange gem in the mother's hair asked her:—

“Where did you get that precious ornament, my love?”

“It was one of poor Aunt Charlotte’s,” she answered smilingly, — “an heirloom, you know.”

At this the little maid looked up into the limpid eyes, like unto drenched speedwells, until the white lids drooped over them; for the child’s eyes pierced like a steel bodkin, and said plainly: —

“You lie trippingly. Did I not see the cavalier lay it in your palm with a kiss yester eve on the terrace?”

The mother ordered her to the school-room, remarking to the governess: —

“That child’s voice grows more disagreeable every day,” which was singular, seeing that she had never spoken except with her eyes. The serving men and maids shunned her, for they felt she knew of their backslidings. Even the dog slunk with his tail be-

tween his legs, and fawned at her feet when he had stolen a bone. Sometimes she veiled her eyes and tried to pretend that she did not see, and thus snatched a brief spell of friendship; but in the end something betrayed her and she found herself alone again.

Years glided on, and whilst other children kissed the freckled cowslips in the meadows, and wove daisy-chains in the land of make-believe, she was busy watching the skeletons grow in the family cupboard.

In school she was not a great favourite because her tongue struck hot and cold as when one seizes a pump handle in frost time. Maidenhood followed, and she went with her mother in due course to one of the state balls. She had dreamt of this for a long time, because she had always read in the papers that the Queen was gracious, and all the Princesses endowed with singular

beauty. Now in reality, they were quite a plain family, and the most beautiful of them all was entirely artificial. During the ball that followed many suitors begged to be presented to her, but she had a way of raising her level brows when they paid her a sawdust compliment, that was disconcerting, and as fatal in effect as when one sticks a pin in a calico doll. The women, too, found her presence even more trying than the men. The mother wept bitterly all the way home at having a daughter with such an unfortunate manner. Poor Verita had a bad time. "She never even tries to cultivate conversational graces; she has a most disastrous knack of blurting out home truths: it's most indelicate; she never got it from me. You will alienate all my friends," she continued, sobbing; "it is positively indecent the way you call a spade a spade; no one, no one," dabbing her eyes with a cobweb of

lace that had cost a poor woman her eyesight, "can afford to tell the truth if they wish to remain in society."

"No one *is* in society, who does tell the truth," added the governess, who was a privileged person; "mendacity is the essential oil of the social machinery."

"You need not be a liar, my dear," said the family friend, who was in the Foreign Office, "because you have acquired the tongue of well-bred society: it only needs diplomacy. For instance, don't tell Tommy Bank's mother that his hair is carroty. It is unkind, and *she* couldn't help it. Say it is Venetian red, or call it a Rossetti fancy. Don't be too beastly accurate in your descriptions. If you *must* allude to Lady Bee's eye, call it espiègle, roving, even alluringly intermittent, but don't call it a wall eye. Never forget that one of the uses of language is to say improper things with pro-

priety, and that conversation was invented for the purpose of mutual deception."

Bearing in mind the fatal gifts of the jaundiced fay, it will readily be seen how much her family stood in need of sympathy ; and how much the unfortunate maid herself stood in need of pity. She was most unhappy, for her fatal gift increased with the years. She saw weak places under seeming strength, foulness at the heart, of beauty. Once at a great national day of rejoicing, when the crowds yelled with joy as they marched under miles of bunting, and hanging garlands, to martial music, and the upper classes beamed graciously on the lower in the exuberance of national feeling, she felt frightened ; for she could read rebellion and curses under the workmen's blouses, and see the great social fester gathering slowly but surely to a head.

Sometimes in exalted moments the walls

of the mansions in the west would fall away, as it were, so that all the skeletons in the closets would be laid bare ; and further east, where the struggling poor and labouring serfs are huddled together waging war for bread, the sight became so painful that she would hide her eyes and wish for blindness. Even at the birthday party of a noted financier she could not enjoy her *crème menthe*, because of the faces of the toiling wretches, scarcely human, who stared at her out of the bosses of the gold plate : he had made his millions by sweating. This went on, until at length one day love came to her in the guise of a well-known man with old-fashioned ideas of women, based on centuries of her silence. The shyness in her heart weighted her eyelids, and softened her tongue ; so they were betrothed, and she went on a visit to her future home. Alas ! her happiness was short-lived. The lovely cottages, covered

with roses and eglantine, of the tenants, the picturesque gardens that made her lover famous in the tourist world, were seed-beds of diphtheria and fever, for the flowers thrived on stagnant sewage. When she told him, he was angry.

Her visit to his mother ended, she went to the chamber of legislature to hear him speak. She saw a breathless crowd of men listening to his glowing advocacy of a bill for child protection, because it would advance his cause with the party he wished to conciliate. Her heart burned, and she leant her hot forehead against the grille, as a recent event rose before her: A week ago, riding across a heath that was part of her betrothed's estate, she had come to a tumbled-down hut, from which the wailing of a child reached her. Tethering her horse to a tree, she entered, to find a little 'ad weeping piteously at being left alone.

She took him on her knee and he looked at her with the eyes of her lover, under the odd brows that were so distinguishing a trait of his family; and so she sat there, with the child on her lap, strange thoughts flitting through her mind, until the gypsy-faced mother returned. The woman confirmed her fatal intuition by a torrent of abuse, then burst into tears at the sight of the gold piece the lady gave her. She had ridden back with scorn, tearing at her affection, but the desire for love dominated all else. She went there again a few days later, to find the hut razed by the master's orders, and the vagabond woman and her brat driven from the parish — yet he was running for a higher place in the state by preaching the duty he neglected himself.

In her stress of soul, she sought a venerable priest. His eyes sank under her burning gaze, he smoothed his hands gently, and

raised them deprecatingly to check the torrent of her words that struck home unerringly as Mjöllnir the magic hammer of Thor. "The weapon of woman is gentleness, daughter; all violence is to be avoided. St. Paul says —"

She listened patiently to his homily (although she had a womanly grudge against Paul, and a conviction that some one had jilted him as Saul); for she remembered that the poor ecclesiastic had a nephew, one of twelve sons of a widow whom he wished to place in a living it was in the power of her betrothed to bestow.

Neither did a visit she paid to the Diogenes of his time avail her aught. His particular barrel was exceedingly comfortable, not to say luxurious; for he recognised that philosophy uttered from the head of a choicely decked table might go down nowadays, when philosophy uttered

from a common or garden barrel would be indicted as a nuisance. As a last resource, — for she had of course heard that the poet plays at Providence nowadays, — she sought with fitting timidity an audience with one of them of high renown. He was courteously amical.

“Life is complex, dear lady,” said he, picking a fluff off his velvet sleeve, “and the conditions of modernity do not admit of perfect truth. Truth is nudity. She has an awkward trick of posing naked and unashamed, and there is a prejudice against ‘the altogether’ in the mind of the average person, who is the public. You see, it doesn’t do, dear child; drapery has become a necessity, it is the subterfuge behind which civilisation seeks to hide her sins against nature. The well of truth is circled by black adamantine stones; its waters are acrid, purgative, leaving an after-taste that”

interferes with appetite. It is for that reason that most people prefer to drink of the Fountain of Expediency — ”

Poor Verita felt that his arguments were unanswerable, but as she had drunk of the waters of the direful well, and been anointed with the tears of the dead sea, they availed her little. So she took off her ring, — the stones in it seemed to laugh at her as the mocking eyes of the world serpent that lies coiled round the well of truth, — and sent it back to him with his freedom.

Then her kindred disowned her; for it is really unpleasant to have doubts as to the sanity of any member of a family wishing to get on in the world; yet what else could one conclude from the conduct of a woman, who could reject the match of the season, in the interest of truths, that nobody wished to see?

‘ So one raw autumn day when the wind

and rain were having a tussle for mastery, and the rain fell in a flurry, before the ill-mannered buffeting of Thrascias and spluttered like a spiteful woman; poor Verita took her bundle and left home.

After many wanderings she found herself in the entrance city of the Land of the Free; and when she had seated herself upon a stone near the harbour she cried with relief and joy, for here surely would she find equality and truth.

It would be too painful to dwell upon her utter disillusionment. At last she closed her eyes for very pain of seeing, and learnt to walk as in a dream, and as she wandered along the city streets with her gaze turned inwards, the outward impressions seemed to creep into her soul unconsciously and nestle there, making her independent of the world outside; for they took on quite new attributes as they

fused with herself. The characters she met sloughed their painted skins, and all the other falsities with which they strove to hide their mental and moral deficiencies, and appeared to her as they were.

So she wrote a book; for it was very difficult to find bread, raiment, and lodging. She led a very lonely life, for women turned from her with a fear of being round out, and men would have naught to do with her. The unfortunate gifts of the fairy had the effect of making her contradict even men's unspoken thoughts, and that is a thing no man likes. .

Seeing things always in undress, as it were, made her forget that other folks were for the most part myopic. When the book was done, she set out for Booksellers' Row in search of a publisher. She knocked at a great many doors, mounted many weary stairs, and always the answer was the same:

"We admire it very much, but we have no market for books in the tongue you write in; electroplated tongues, or gilt tongues, or better still wooden tongues, with a church door or cradle interest, we can sell, but iron tongues, and added to that red-hot iron tongues, we have no use for."

Needless to say, she got very discouraged. At length one day she came to an alley, and there sitting at the door of a small shop was a little man who scrutinised her closely as she passed. She turned back and handed him the book.

He had been looking for a long time for something fresh, so he patted her on the back and sent out the town crier with a pot of red paint and a brush, and one morning the reading portion of the city woke up to find a new name on the list of its chroniclers. Verita was not greatly elated by the attentions bestowed upon her, because she knew

from observation they would not last above a moon, and that on an average every two moons brought out the crier with a new name and a fresh pot of paint. Her book sold; the little man came for another. She searched through the box of negatives stored away in her memory, some of them looked up at her, with the ghost eyes that old photographs seem to acquire with years, and whispered, "Say a word for me; you alone know the cross upon which I was crucified," and so she wrote of them.

Now the city in which she lived was unlike any other city in the world. All the vices of antiquity, with the niceties of civilisation added, flourished there like chickweed in an untended garden. No one minded in the least; everybody knew it, but no one admitted it, because it was a code amongst them not to notice it as long as it did not interfere with their personal rôle in the game

of make-belief: and to call all such things by foreign names.

Of course occasionally there was an epidemic of acute moral dyspepsia, as it is against human nature to keep up a pretence, permanently. Then there would be a tremendous outcry in the state — a crop of toadstools had appeared suddenly in one of the public flower beds — there would have to be a sacrifice to the Moloch of morals. The choice of a victim was always dependent on peculiar circumstances: sometimes he would be chosen from the leading politicians, at other times out of the ranks of art or literature. Commerce rarely contributed a victim, as it was the God of the people, and it did not do to throw too strong a light on the ways of its votaries, on account of the national credit. Such outbreak occurred once in a decennary, each citizen was provided with a broom, all the daily papers set

up new type, and whoever raised the most dust or used the largest capitals was lauded as a public benefactor. The history of the various victims of this peculiar national trait, and the esoteric causes that led to the choice of them, has not yet been written.

Well, poor Verita finished a book just at this time, and she went along the row with trepidant steps to offer it for sale. There was an astonishing change in the atmosphere; all the book-vendors wore clean overalls, as when an unexpected visitor knocks suddenly at the nursery door, and the nurse pops one on to hide the baby's frock. Of course her unfortunate vision made it clear to her that they wore just the same old suits underneath. Needless to say, she found no buyer.

All the windows were filled with Nursery Idyls, the subject of man and woman had become positively indecent: all the new

editions inserted parsley bed, or gooseberry bush, wherever there had been mention of a lying-in or crib, these latter being too suggestive — in fact, the entire reading public were going in for a milk diet.

“Have I said anything that is not true?” she asked plaintively.

“No, that is precisely the trouble; it is only too true. But we want amiable fiction utterly unlike reality. All your men and women have — pardon the expression — ‘tummy’; now the public won’t stand that: in America, indeed, face and hands are the only mentionable portions of the human anatomy.”

So she took up her bundle once more and left this great curious city, with its many superstitions, behind her, and set out on another stage of her journey. Sometimes she halted at an inn, or took up her abode for a while at a farm house; occasionally her sheer longing for human compan-

ionship beguiled her to talk of the things she had seen and the conclusions she had drawn from them. It was inevitable that there should be a certain brutality in her plain speaking, and it made her listeners shrink away from her. Feeling this, she withdrew even more into herself, and individuals became distasteful to her; for if she took a seat in a diligence and observed her fellow-passengers, it often seemed as if she were watching the capers of images in some ugly dream of degeneration: misformed, badly set ears, nervous tic of eyelids, crooked mouths, twitching ill-cut nostrils; sorry features paying their debt of ugliness to disease and crime.

Each moon made the road longer and lonelier; she could hear her heart drip, drip, drip inside, as if the fatal waters were wearing it slowly away, as she grew older and more world-worn.

She had been journeying for some weeks

through a remote district and had been forced to sleep for two nights in the woods. It was the decline of a bleak day, the north wind was hustling the clouds southwards like flocks of frightened sheep, when she turned off the wide road on to a beaten track leading through a clearing. She was so tired that she seized the shoots of the dwarf ash and pulled herself on by them, every step becoming more painful, until at last she sank exhausted at the selvedge of a wood. A glad voice, singing a song of the trull forces of nature, the warring of man against them, their binding in withies to make symmetry out of their rude strength, roused her from her lethargy; something in the deep, sweet notes with the ring of true metal in them soothed her jarred nerves.

A man with a buck across his shoulders came crashing through the undergrowth,

hound at his heels. His face was tanned by the seasons, his eyes — clear, still, blue-grey as the pebbles in the bed of a shallow river when the sky is azure overhead — looked friendlily into hers. Noting her weariness and her broken footwear, he stopped.

“You are tired, have walked far; will you rest?”

She assented gladly, and, rising, followed him until they came to a fair-sized log house with a smaller cabin near it. Pale, late roses covered the portals, climbing plants hugged the walls, and a tiny rift of smoke curled up from the chimney. He bade her enter, and pointed to a chair made of tree-stems twisted when tender, cushioned with reeds. He brought her a bowl of goat's milk to drink and fetched her water, and left her. When she had waved the dust from her travel-stained face,

smoothed her hair, and cooled her burning feet, he came back and marvelled at the delicate features and the lines sorrow had graven on her face. The gloaming was gathering outside, the wood-fire spluttered and hissed cheerily; she dreaded the onward path. He, marking the fearsome look she cast at the "creeping shadows," said:—

"Whither are you bound? You must rest here to-night; the way is difficult to find."

"Nowhere," she answered; "I just go as the path leads."

He laughed joyously.

"There is no path to lead you from here, unless you return by the one you came."

At that, the gloom deepened on her face, for she had no glad memories to draw her back to the places she had left. He prepared a deer steak and set out manchets of

bread and some rough grape wine. She ate faintly, and soon fell asleep from sheer weariness.

The man watched the tell-tale shadows playing in the hollows of her face; he drew off the worn shoes and slipped a straw-plaited footstool under her feet. When she awoke, the gloom was thick in the room and the air was chill, but the fire burned on the hearth like a great warm heart; the man was reading an old well-thumbed volume by its glow—the light cast his face in bronze.

“Rested?” he asked.

She nodded in silence; the tense lines were slackened about her mouth; it rested her to look at him, for she found no guile: all was strong and clear. She noted a dis-used spinning-wheel in a corner; the wool on the distaff was discoloured by smoke and dust. He read the question in her thoughts.

"It was my mother's; she joined my father here, and they lived together many happy years. When I came to boyhood they sent me out along the highroad to the cities beyond. I read in the schools of men, visited their cities, shared their pursuits, tested what their civilisation had to offer me, then I came back here to the clean, free, simple life. Twice a year, when the bluebells ring spring-chimes in the hollows, and the leaves weep blood in fear of death, I go to the cross-roads near the big town and meet a wagon with the supplies I need. Sometimes, but rarely, a friend sends me a new book. The father and mother sleep under the tree where they exchanged their betrothal kiss. Life is good when one drinks it in deep draughts from the very breasts of Mother Earth."

Something in the serious, questioning eyes with which he looked at her as he ended,

impelled her to speak; and so she unrolled the scroll of her life and spelled the troubled writing of it for him. Strangely enough, as she did so, the drip, drip, drip in her heart seemed to cease in some miraculous way, and when she said simply as a child: "That is all, and that is why I go where the path leads," the shadows had huddled into the corners of the room as if in fear. He rose to his feet and said gravely:—

"Come and watch the dawn."

He found her hand in the gloom and led her to the door, still clasping it as they stood at the border of the wood and watched for the coming of the day.

Straight before them lay an unbroken stretch of russet moorland, to the left a crescent of crouching hills, all wrapped in the cold paleness of a clear autumnal night. Suddenly the grey breath of the night quickened as if disturbed; slender, spear-

like shafts of light, scarce definable, as colour, crept cautiously above the horizon; and as they grew bolder, the sky above flushed lemon-yellow, deepening as they rose, the grey above receding tremulously, leaving a stretch of blue. Rifts of light and shadow romped across it like freshly awakened children. The horizon and the features of the hills became sharply defined, as a negative under the action of an intensifying bath: the sluggish mists lifted themselves reluctantly, and slid away. There was a mystic something, that no words can define, an earth thrill, an electric quiver, quite outside them as man and woman. The trees woke to it in response with a spontaneous rustling as if stretching their branches from sleep; the birds roused one by one until the whole wood resounded with their morning chatter.

She drew a great breath, and turned to

meet his gravely smiling eyes. He pointed to the reddening bramble-leaves and the purpling sloe-berries :—

“The heralds of the death of summer. At noon I go to fetch my winter store. Will you stay and rest whilst I am away? Two noons will see my return.”

He took a key and opened the cabin door; she saw that it held a simple bed and some plain furniture.

“The guest room in my mother’s time.”

Later on he asked laughingly :—

“What can I bring you from the town?”

She coloured and drew a ring from her finger, saying as she gave it to him :—

“Exchange this for the things written on this slip of paper.”

She stood on the threshold, shading her eyes with her hand, and watched him walk beside the wagon across the moorland; when he had become a mere speck, she

turned her hands to the unwonted task of housework. Once she found herself singing as she fetched water from the spring. The evening of the next day came before she had finished all the womanly tasks she found to do; her hands were hot and sore, but the drip, drip in her heart had quite ceased. The following noon found her waiting at the wicket gate, the sun hung drowsily, her heart was beating in fluttering throbs of suspense, her eyes strained in their sockets. At length she saw a dust-cloud rise like smoke where the sky stooped to kiss the moor; her face youthened as she waited. When he reached the wicket, she stood with a cruse in her hand and bade him shyly welcome as she offered it.

It seemed natural that she should help with the unloading, and prepare the evening meal. It gave her pleasure to see his eyes return to her face when they marked her

handiwork in the house. Women seldom value the simplicities of life until the complexities of their nature have played them false.

Later, when the moon worked witchery in the cool autumn night, and broidered phantasies in silver fretwork amongst the trees and dew-spangled cobwebs; and the whirring saw of the night-churr, hawking for moths in the dusk, broke the silence harshly, they went out to see the night-witch enter on her kingdom.

They watched it in silence. Something squealed piteously in the thicket; she shivered, and said uneasily : —

“Nature is cruel; even here there is pain.”

“Ah,” said he, “that is the worst result of your fatal dowry: you see all creation in detail; you lose the wide view that looks at life as a whole; you forget that you, and I,

and each living man and woman is but a bit of colour, sad or gay, as the case may be, in a cosmic mosaic; the utmost we can do is to fit ourselves into our tiny place as evenly as we can, and, if we do not, the loss is our own; in ourselves we are so trivial that our absence would scarce be noticeable in the boldness of the design. You have looked for truth everywhere but in one place," he said softly, — "in the eyes of a child at your breast, conceived of a man you love."

She flushed into warmth, — for in truth she had gathered the dream-child many a night to her breast, — and replied falteringly: —

"And when the child's eyes grow old, what then?"

"Aah, then they will have taught you so much truth that you will look for it in yourself. Peace will come to you, when you have learnt to live from the in out, not the out in."

The tears trickled in drops from her lashes ; why, she knew not herself.

“I have waited all my life for you to come to my door ; all these years a chair has been empty at my hearth, a place at my side. The rafters have never echoed the patter of tiny feet or the cry of piping voices. The little ones, alone make the white flower of union, are the only pure reason for it ; all other is base. Will you stay and fill the place I have kept all white for you ?”

She sobbed pleadingly.

“Make me blind, blind so that I may never see if change comes ; quickly, now ; I will not flinch at the pain.”

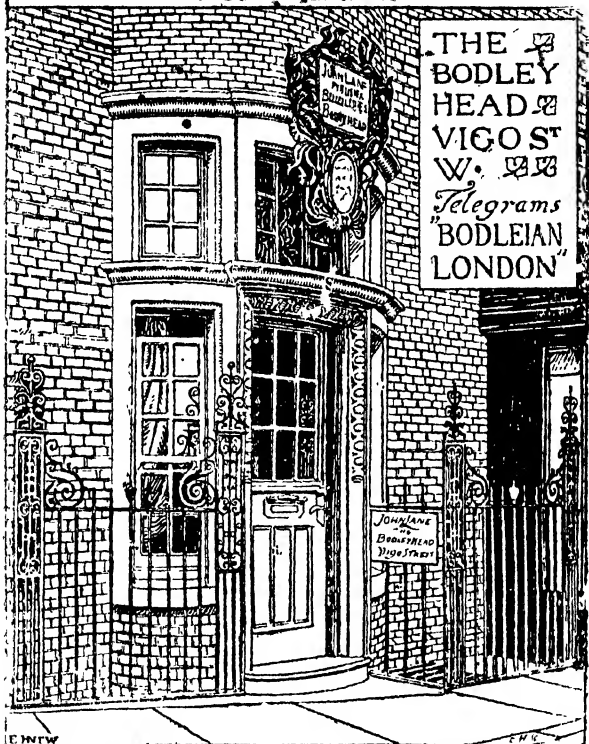
“Still afraid ?” he cried exultantly. “My blind faith in my strength against your fear-some insight any day ! Look in my eyes.”

She looked, and saw herself glorified in the love-light in his, and hers sank under

his gaze, and the sleeping wood echoed with the cry of his great joy. He slipped her own ring on her finger and lifted her up in his arms, and whispered as he carried her, "Lay your ear to my heart and listen," and he sealed both eyes with a kiss. "Thus will I blind you, dear wife, thus always."

We may safely conclude that she found no further inconvenience from her fatal dowry; for when a man and woman mate with such clean intent as these two, they need not fear to look into the well of truth.

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